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THE RHYTHMICAL LINE

Reasoning about art can be said to turn on two fundamental categories, the substance and the form of the artistic product I intend, in the present study, to deal with the basic principle of outward poetic form, the fundamental technical means of expression.

We must begin by asking: Is there any one principle of form which is absolutely essential in poetry. Gummere, in his *Handbook of Poetics*, quotes a recent writer to this effect: "Metre is the sole condition absolutely demanded by poetry." Simple observation of the fact that in primitive poetry the rhythmical line is all that we find on the side of art-form, must lead to the conclusion that the rhythmical line is the one essential element of poetic form. This is in itself a patent fact, requiring no further argument. But in this fact we have our problem, which is the interpretation of the ground of this fact in the nature and history of the human mind, or to show the psychological factors of which the rhythmical line is the expression and result. The problem is, therefore, essentially psychological, a fact of which the literature of poetics has been only imperfectly aware.—"Human beliefs and institutions, as well as all the products of art and modes of labor—in short all elements of human culture—even though subject to natural conditions of various sorts, are essentially mental processes or the expression of psychical activities. Hence no theory, relating to these phenomena, is acceptable that does violence to well-established psychological principles."¹

I shall take for the basis of my deductions the hexameter line of Homer, as typically representing primitive poetic form within the Aryan family of languages. The term primitive is here, as in all studies of primitive culture, to be taken relatively—"According as the phenomena are simpler in character, and require fewer antecedent conditions for their explanation, we

¹ E. L. Schaub, Introduction to Wundt's: *Elements of Folk Psychology*.

may be confident that we are really dealing with primitive conditions. Culture would be absolutely primitive if no antecedent mental development whatsoever could be presupposed. Such an absolute concept can never be realized in experience." (Wundt)²

In the epic line of Homer and of the Germanic epic, we have rhythmical series of six and four accents, six being the limit never exceeded in the typical long lines. Now, in accounting for these lines in terms of psychological interpretation, several factors must be reckoned with.

First of these, in importance, is the observation presented in Wundt's psychological experiments, that the capacity of the mind for holding ideas or sense percepts, clearly and distinctly, is pretty definitely limited. It is here a question of the range of immediate consciousness, the power of the mind to grasp a certain number of ideational elements or percepts together, as a whole, or a unit of ideation. The methods of experimentation and of direct introspection can be employed to equal advantage. Of experiments in sense perception it will suffice to quote the result of visual tests. "The number of clear ideas for the sense of sight amounts to four or five when they are simple and familiar. If they are complex the number varies from one to three, according to the degree of complexity." Specifically on the point of our present inquiry Wundt says "If we look at the metrical forms employed in music and poetry we find that the limit of three degrees is never exceeded. The absolute amount of accentuation may, of course, be very different in different cases. But in immediate perception these different degrees are always arranged in three principal classes which are alone of any real importance in metrical division as a basis of classification in metrical forms. As a matter of fact, however, music and poetry never push their use of this aid in the formation of easily comprehended ideational series to the extreme limit of conscious grouping. Each member in a rhythmical series must be referred to its predecessors, and for this to be done with pleasure and without effort, it is necessary that the grasp of

² The quotations from Wundt are taken from his *Physiologische Psychologie* and his *Elements of Folk Psychology*.

consciousness be not too heavily taxed. So that a time like the 6/4 is one of the most complex of the rhythms employed in music.



The psychological law, determining the rhythmical line, is here incisively presented. The rhythm of the hexameter corresponds to Wundt's observation, for it consists of two 3 accent parts. To the ear this is quite perceptible, while for the eye the division is not marked in the traditional way of printing the line. It would be more correct to indicate the break in the middle in some way, or else to write the two parts over each other. In this way the real character of the line would be more exactly expressed as a rhythmical couplet of two 3 stress parts. By uniting the two into one line a compound form with six stresses is reached which, as the 6/4 time in music is a maximum rarely exceeded. The rhythmical effect of the two in conjunction, is that of a rising and falling movement, yielding a form of a higher order. We see the same combination in the alliterative line of the early Germanic epic, with its caesura, and also in the metre of Nibelungen and Gudrun epics. Here, however, the unity of the two parts is mainly marked and supported by a later device, namely, rhyme. Arranging motives in couplets is the usual thing in the simple song forms of music. The motive recurs, i.e. the rhythmical movement is repeated, giving the effect of confirmation. Or there may be an inversion of the melodic movement, or a change of the harmonic basis. Such changes are made without endangering the recognition of the motive. However, a change of rhythm, or a shifting of the main accent make it unrecognizable. While poetry holds to a regular rhythmical movement, throughout one composition, music has gone far in the inner differentiation and variety of its rhythms. One might pause here to ask, why it is that poetry has not followed music further in this direction. Poetry being the art of the word, hence essentially conceptual, could manifestly not keep pace with music in rhythmic-melodic development, while music, depending on melody and rhythm solely as its means of

expression, could go to the very limit of rhythmic-melodic possibilities. But might not poetry have gone farther in differentiation of rhythm than it actually has done. To be sure, there is a strong tendency in this direction in the free rhythms of the ode, and one might surmise that it is largely the desire for greater internal variation and flexibility of rhythm, that underlies the experiments of the new movement of free verse, a striving toward more subtle and diversified rhythms, intimately corresponding to the changing courses of emotion.

Now, the rhythmical line of poetry is not only a rhythmic-melodic series of sound, for then it would be pure music, not poetry; but it a rhythmical group of words expressing ideas. Under this aspect, the law of the span of consciousness again comes into the foreground as the decisive factor. For now it becomes specifically a question of the capacity of the mind to grasp a series of ideational elements, of focalizing the attention on an ideational complex of a certain extent. As Wundt points out, music and poetry use the aid of rhythmical forms in the formation of easily comprehended ideational series. The poet has something to tell and wants to be readily understood. He therefore instinctively makes the sentence, expressing an idea or image coincide as nearly as possible with the rhythmical series of accents, the same law of mental focalization, and grasp or measure of comprehension governing the one as well as the other. At this point the psychology of direct introspection affords the easiest means of verification. Mental self-examination shows that a relatively short series of ideational units comes into immediate consciousness, then sinks below the limen of distinct consciousness as a new one takes its place. This process is going on continually in our consciousness. The attention is momentarily concentrated on one idea, and passes from one to the other with only so much contextual consciousness as is necessary to refer and relate one group to the preceding and following groups. To be sure, the highly trained and unusually gifted mind is capable of exerting itself to exercise more complex intellectual functions, e.g. in the comprehension of involved periods of difficult writing. But poetry, by its very nature, is not the form for difficult mental processes, and does not address itself exclusively, nor even mainly, to intellectuals. The dismal

failure of so much philosophical and otherwise difficult verse is chiefly due to the writer's failure to realize the fundamental requirement of poetic expression, which should always be simple, sensuous and passionate. At this point a brief reference to another factor, setting a superior limit upon the length of the line, should be inserted, viz., the exigencies of breathing. At the earlier period when poetry was always recited or sung, this circumstance was highly cooperative in punctuating the poet's recital, and in influencing the division in the direction of units of equal length.

However, it is not to be expected that the individual poetic thought or image, expressed in a sentence, should always coincide exactly with the accent group of regular rhythmical form. "In language, rhythmical expression is bound up with the meaning of words, and the context of thought expressed by the words. Thereby certain limits are set upon rhythmical movement." (Wundt). This means that the perfect coincidence of the rhythmical with the ideational series, assuming that it is desirable, is not always possible. In Wundt's opinion this coincidence is much more the rule in ancient than in modern poetry which leans toward the tempo and stress of ordinary speech. He also observes that displeasure is caused when the rhythmically arranged ideas exceed the range of comprehension, or when unexpected variations interrupt the rhythmical series, and finally when a certain rhythm by monotonous regularity wearies the attention.

In order to get a satisfactory practical solution of this aspect of our question, we must turn to the poetical compositions themselves, to see what the practice of the poets really is. Reading a fairly large amount of various poetry "ad hoc" made it certain to my judgment, that the agreement of the ideational series with the rhythmical group is decidedly the rule in poetry. The fidelity with which the language of poetry follows and reflects the process of ideation is in close harmony with the essential purpose of the poet's art, which is to present the emotional experience of life genuinely, simply and pleasingly. Thus, the formal principle of rhythmical and symmetrical

arrangement of poetical ideas appears under the form of psychological interpretation as an inner necessity of perfect expression.

Poetry, in its artistic features, is not limited to this principle of outer form, for there are other equally important requirements of poetic style;—picturesqueness, imaginativeness and ideality of expression and view, in all their various implications, and all that is called “inner form.” But poetry as form, as an art in the sense of tectonic structure and symmetrical order of presentation absolutely demands rhythmical and regular form. It is needless to say that when we have only the outer form without poetical content, there is no real poetry, only verse, “unpoetical verse.” But when poetical revolutionaries throw form aside, and “free verse” walks abroad on irregular feet and lines, we must be careful to distinguish between the freedom which has its source in artistic impotence, and the sincere efforts of vigorous innovators at widening and deepening the means of poetical expression. With free rhythms, well established as an entirely legitimate phenomenon, it must not be forgotten that they have hitherto always been restricted to certain occasions and moods. The Greeks used them only for choral, i.e., ceremonial purposes. Goethe did not return to them after the ferment of “storm and stress” had given way to mature artistic understanding. However, classical free verse is not entirely without certain restricting principles of form. Wundt says: “The variety of rhythmical forms is after all governed by certain general principles, and this is the strongest proof of the unchangeable character of the rhythmical sensations.”

The question of the origin of rhythm and its historico-genetic development has thus far not been touched upon. Our knowledge of the innermost nature of mind and its functions, as well as of the psychophysical processes, is not as yet sufficient to enable us to say, what consciousness, emotion, will, ideation, in themselves really are. Experience and reflection have led to a reasoned view of the manifestations and development of these phenomena; but every view concerning their

ultimate nature is still largely speculative.³ The *fact* of rhythm is contained in the fact of life as motion; the *sense* of rhythm is contained in the time-sense. The earliest rhythmic phenomenon of clearly artistic character is the dance, preserving the closest connection with the primitive age. Primitive people, under strong emotional excitement, jump, run, gesticulate. In this, and in the mimic play accompanying it, we may recognize the first motor expression of feeling. It becomes regular and rhythmical in the ceremonial group-dances. It must be assumed, also, that music and language, in their most primitive forms of noise-instruments and vocal articulation, appear from the beginning in conjunction with the dance. "Musical instruments, in the strict sense of the word, are almost unknown to primitive man. . . . The music of speech exalts and supplements the dance. . . . When all parts of the body are in motion, the articulatory organs also tend to participate. . . . The real musical accompaniment of the dance is furnished by the human voice in the dance-song." Especially the cult-song,

³ The following passage from W. Dilthey's famous essay '*Die Einbildungskraft des Dichters*' may throw light on this problem:

"Die Poetik muss insbesondere das rhythmische Gefühl in seinem Ursprung, vermöge dessen es im Lebensgefühl selber wurzelt, aufsuchen. Denn wie unser Körper aussen überall Symmetrie zeigt, so geht durch seine inneren Funktionen der Rhythmus. Der Herzschlag wie die Atmung verlaufen in Rhythmen, das Gehen in einer regelmässigen Pendelbewegung. In langsamerem, doch auch regelmässigen Wechsel folgen einander Wachen und Schlaf, Hunger und Mahlzeit. Die Arbeit wird durch den Rhythmus der Bewegung erleichtert. Gleichmässig fallende Tropfen, rhythmisch wiederkehrende Wellen, der einförmige Takt, den die Wärterin dem Kinde hören lässt, wirken beschwichtigend auf die Gefühle und erregen Schlaf. Die Erklärung dieser umfassenden psychischen Bedeutung der Rhythmik ist ein noch ungelöstes Problem. Denn dass wir vermittelt des Rhythmus leichter das Ganze des Empfindungswechsels einheitlich auffassen, erklärt augenscheinlich nicht die elementare Gewalt des Rhythmus. Erwägt man das Verhältnis einer einfach auftretenden Empfindung zu dem Rhythmischen der Bewegungen, wie sie für Gesicht und Gehör den Reiz bilden, und betrachtet nun die Freude am Rhythmus als die Wiederkehr eines ähnlichen Verhältnisses in höherer Ordnung, da die Teile dieses rhythmischen Verlaufs Empfindungen sind, so bleibt das doch noch vorläufig eine unbeweisbare Hypothese. Gerade die Poetik hat hier die Aufgabe, zunächst empirisch die Tatsachen ihres weiten Gebietes, vom Lied, der Melodie und dem Tanz der Naturvölker bis zu der Gliederung des griechischen Chorliedes vergleichend zu bearbeiten." *Editor*.

in close reciprocal relations with the dance and music, can be taken as the earliest form of rhythmical poetical utterance. "At a more advanced stage of primitive culture we find, as the result of joint labor, the work-song whose melody and rhythm are determined by the labor—In the work-song it is the constantly recurring rhythm of the work that tends directly to the repetition of the rhythmic and melodic motives—The musical element of speech, at this stage, is the refrain. One might say, without qualification, that the poetic form of speech began with the refrain." It seems correct to say that the rhythmical form of poetry is not a self-generated phenomenon of language; it received its regular and rhythmical form from early close relation with music and the dance. Such views as these are not the result of speculative theorizing; they rest on the investigations of ethnology and folk-psychology. At the bottom of all the conscious rhythmical activities lies pleasure in rhythmical motion. "The earliest aesthetic stimuli are symmetry and rhythm."

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